



PRESS RELEASE

House Armed Services Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD SPENCE FULL COMMITTEE HEARING ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD COLOMBIA

This morning, the committee will take up the issue of U.S. policy toward Colombia.

Our witnesses are:

- Brian Sheridan, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations & Low-Intensity Conflict
- General Charles Wilhelm, Commander in Chief of U.S. Southern Command
- Rand Beers, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics & Law Enforcement Affairs

Gentlemen, thank you for agreeing to appear today and I look forward to your testimony.

Much has happened since the committee last focused on the issue of the counter narcotics threat in Colombia and the Andean Region. As we meet this morning, the Administration's proposed \$1.3 billion military assistance package is pending before the Congress. Proponents of this proposal believe it is the correct solution to assist the Colombian government in re-establishing sovereignty over the southern areas of the country where narcotics and guerrilla activities are dominant.

However, critics believe that the plan is not well thought out and fraught with the risk of deepening U.S. military involvement in the largely civil internal conflict that has plagued Colombia for decades.

It is my hope that this morning's hearing will allow a full discussion of these competing policy perspectives. But it is also important that we fully review and discuss the proper role for the Department of Defense in the overall counter drug effort in the region.

Due to legislation that originated in this committee over a decade ago, the Department of Defense has been actively providing a supporting role for law enforcement agencies in the interdiction of illegal narcotics. Current law specifically establishes the Department of Defense as the lead federal agency for the air and maritime detection and monitoring of drug traffickers outside the United States. However, in recent years the Department has sought to expand its counter-drug role beyond detection and monitoring. The Department

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has actively provided direct military assistance to Colombia and other Andean nations, including the training and equipping of an army infantry brigade and naval riverine units.

To date, the Department has been able to avoid becoming entangled in Colombia's civil conflict that has raged for decades and killed over 35,000 people. However, the Administration's latest proposal would significantly increase U.S. military involvement in Colombia, and may, as a practical matter, increase the number of U.S. military personnel on the ground.

The increasing cooperation among guerrilla, paramilitary, and drug trafficking elements has raised the question of whether increased DOD support for Colombia's counter-drug activities could inadvertently draw U.S. military personnel into the counter-insurgency campaign. The Administration has stated that U.S. policy is not to support Colombian counter-insurgency efforts. However, in some parts of Colombia, the distinction between drug trafficker and guerrilla simply does not exist.

The situation in Colombia requires a clear recognition of its impact on the region. Colombia's increased drug production is fueling the vast criminal enterprises of drug traffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitary groups within and outside Colombia's borders. Neighboring countries such as Panama, Ecuador, and Venezuela are struggling to cope with routine incursions by such groups across their borders. These developments pose new threats to regional stability and undermine U.S. interests in the area.

Therefore, in my mind, the question is not if the United States should help Colombia, but how. The committee and the Congress face fundamental questions in this regard.

Does the program proposed by the President and pending before the House provide the proper policy focus and resources mix? More fundamentally, is the Administration's proposal to significantly expand the legal authority of the Department of Defense to operate in Colombia necessary and justified? What is the rationale for thrusting DOD into a foreign assistance role traditionally carried out by the State Department?

I look forward to receiving answers on these matters from our witnesses this morning so that we may better consider the Administration's proposal and make more informed decisions.

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